

## Remarks at a Celebration of African American Music, History, and Culture

May 31, 2002

**The President.** Good afternoon, and welcome to the people's house, the White House. Laura and I are so very pleased that you all came, and we're glad to see you. We had a wonderful time marking Black Music Month last year, and we had some pretty strong company—James Brown, Lionel Hampton, Shirley Caesar, the Four Tops—and we've got some great names with us today as well. And you're welcome. And we're looking forward to a fine afternoon, celebrating music loved by all the world and born right here in America.

I want to thank Laura for escorting me in today. [Laughter] I appreciate so very much our Secretary of Education, Mr. Rod Paige. Thank you for being here, Rod. He carries a heavy burden, and that is to work with school districts and folks all around our country to achieve this noble goal: Every child educated in America—I mean every child—and not one child left behind.

Dr. Bobby Jones is with us. I'm honored to welcome Bobby back. He was here for the gospel tribute, February 2002, and what a tribute that was. It was a fantastic evening.

**Dr. Jones.** We shouted the roof off.

**The President.** Yes, we did. [Laughter] I appreciate the members of the Presidential Commission on the African American Museum of History and Culture; I'll speak a little bit about that in a second. Thank you all for coming.

Afterwards, there's a reception where the Robert E. Lee High School Chorale of Midland, Texas, will be singing. And what makes that interesting and important is that's the high school Laura graduated from. [Laughter] And so did Tommy Franks.

I want to thank all the artists and record label representatives of the entertainment industry who are with us today. Thanks for being here.

Today we'll be entertained by the famed Show Choir from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. They're the bearers of one of America's oldest and finest musical legacies. We thank them for sharing their gifts, and

of course, they're welcome here to the White House.

We've also got some royalty with us, a woman known as the Queen of Gospel. For more than six decades—for more than six decades—I probably wasn't supposed to say that—[laughter]—since her first performance in Chicago's West Point Baptist Church, Albertina Walker has lifted the hearts everywhere.

I reminded Albertina that my middle name was Walker. [Laughter] She now calls me "Cousin." [Laughter] She reminded—her brother's name is George Walker. [Laughter] I call him "W." [Laughter]

But if you give this woman a song of praise, a song like "Lord, Keep Me Day By Day" or "He Keeps On Blessing Me" or "Yes, God Is Real," you'll hear it like it was meant to be sung. Not since her friend and mentor Mahalia Jackson was last recorded has the good news sounded so convincing and so sweet. We're honored you're here, "Cousin." [Laughter] Welcome to the White House.

In the history of Black music, some of the finest moments have taken place right here in this house. Among the first Black soloists to perform in the White House was the daughter of a slave; Sissieretta Jones sang ballads for three Presidents, including McKinley and Roosevelt. President Taft hosted the violinist Joseph Douglass, who was an ancestor of one of our guests today, Frederick Douglass IV. Welcome. Good to see you, sir.

The first Black choir to sing here was the Jubilee Singers from Fisk University. That happened over 120 years ago, during a time when America wasn't a very hospitable place for a lot of Americans. After all, the kids couldn't find a hotel room in which to stay. The next day they were welcomed here by President Chester A. Arthur and touched him deeply with their rendition of the old spiritual "Safe in the Arms of Jesus."

The spiritual has always had that power to move—to move many Americans. And they always will. The people who first sang them and taught them to their children knew the worst of human cruelty and earthly injustice. In their songs we hear the pain of separation, the bitterness of oppression, the troubles of the world. We also hear the courage

of a soul, the strength of a faith, and the trust in God, who will right every wrong and wipe away every tear.

Over many generations, in song both mournful and joyful, the music of Black America has created sounds like no other in America. From the deep South of another era to New Orleans to Chicago to Harlem, Black musicians have set a standard for originality and authenticity.

Someone once described Louis Armstrong's music as always real and true, honest and simple and noble. The same may be said of Black music in so many forms, and the artists who compose it and play it and sing it with such style. How much richer we are to have known the voices of Nat "King" Cole and Lena Horne, Diana Ross, Duke Ellington and their orchestra, Dizzy Gillespie on the horn, superb arrangements of Quincy Jones. America's a richer place for it.

The music varies widely and keeps changing, while incredible talent keeps coming on. Yet, there is a continuous theme: Black music is the sound of experience, written, as Stevie Wonder would say, "in the key of life."

For a long time, many citizens have hoped to see a museum in Washington that conveys the experience of African Americans. I'm pleased that Congress has authorized a Presidential commission, which I take very seriously, to take us closer to the goal of building a National Museum of African American History and Culture. I hope the museum, when it's built, will remind visitors of both the suffering and the triumph, the hurt that was overcome, the barriers that are being cast away.

In the Black American experience, there has been a lot of pain, and America must recognize that. There's been progress, too, and there needs to be more. And always, there will be faith that mankind must be called to a higher calling—to be kind and just, if only he would follow what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the soul-saving music of eternity. The music and culture of Black Americans has brought great beauty into this world. Today, it brings great pride to our country. And for the contributions so many of you have made to that legacy, your fellow Americans are very grateful.

I want to thank you for being here. And it is now my honor to bring to this podium the Queen herself, Albertina Walker.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:20 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to gospel artist Bobby Jones; and Gen. Tommy R. Franks, USA, Commander in Chief, U.S. Central Command.

## **Proclamation 7568—Black Music Month, 2002**

*May 31, 2002*

*By the President of the United States of America*

### **A Proclamation**

America's diverse and extraordinary musical heritage reflects the remarkable cultural and artistic history of our Nation. From gospel, blues, and jazz to rock and roll, rap, and hip-hop, our Nation's musical landscape offers an astounding array of uniquely American styles. During Black Music Month, we celebrate a critically important part of this heritage by highlighting the enduring legacy of African American musicians, singers, and composers, and urging every American to appreciate and enjoy the fabulous achievements of this highly creative community.

Early forms of black American music developed out of the work song, which had its roots in African tribal chants. Through this music, slaves shared stories, preserved history, and established a sense of community. As many African slaves in early America became Christians, they adapted their music into the songs and life of the church. These spirituals eventually evolved into a genre that remains vibrant and very meaningful today—gospel music. This great musical tradition developed under the leadership of people like Thomas Dorsey, who was known as the Father of Gospel Music. He composed many great gospel songs that have become standards, and he established the tradition of the gospel music concert.

Following emancipation, African Americans enjoyed unprecedented opportunities but also faced many new and frequently oppressive challenges. Frustrations from these